New Media Platforms for Local Storytelling: Community Journalism in the Digital Age

Dijil. N*

Research Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Calicut

Abdul Muneer V

Professor of Journalism, EMEA College of Arts & Science, Kondotty, Kerala

Abstract

This article explains the ways in which online hyperlocal media initiatives enable a sophisticated local storytelling network. Local media are essential institutions for the development and preservation of a democratic public sphere and political system. The declining local coverage of legacy media has frequently served as the driving force behind the emergence of new hyperlocal media. The study examines the types and functions of hyperlocal news media to understand the content they produce and their role in a local community. The review of content from hyperlocal apps and local websites centred in Koyilandy, located in the Kozhikode district of Kerala, suggests that these new media platforms have the potential to develop into comprehensive community-based media, filling the gaps in local narratives.

Keywords: *Hyperlocal Media, Community Journalism, Local Storytelling, Civic Participation*

Introduction

The proliferation of new media on news platforms has altered how news is produced and distributed. The mainstream media have lost ground in the ultra-local space, which has been occupied by online platforms (Hess & Waller, 2015). Local issues and locally relevant content continue to matter to audiences, perhaps more than ever. In this scenario, the emerging hyperlocal platforms provide opportunities for audiences to share and discover relevant content

* Correspondence: dijilnanthanath08@gmail.com

within their own networks and communities. Hyperlocal can effectively connect with local residents by delivering local news, reporting on local politics, and involving them in matters pertinent to their region (Youkongpun, 2015). We have seen examples of this trend in the increased use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook for community organisation and local update sharing, despite their lack of feature support for these activities. This situation necessitates the rise of dedicated web platforms for hyperlocal content. The trend is visible across the global media landscape, as independent websites and mobile applications have emerged as the primary sources of local updates. Radcliffe, in his report for the UK innovation foundation NESTA, defines this form of community news as "online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode, or other small, geographically defined community" (Radcliffe, 2013).

Online activities have become increasingly crucial in catering to the needs of local audiences. Emerging hyperlocal media models and community-based media, which tend to be online are gaining significant interest in communities around the world (Youkongpun, 2015). Harte and Williams (2019) argue that hyperlocal media's approach to engaging news audiences in the United Kingdom and the United States has the potential to promote local communities and civic involvement. They say it is incredibly encouraging that in hyperlocal media, so many people are producing varied, important, and necessary public interest journalism, often without the legal and institutional support previously provided by the likes of established local newspaper companies. Hyperlocal offers a space for new entrants to contribute to local reporting and discourse, and the sector is likely to become more prominent as a social network in the future with the prospects of citizen journalism and community media (Radcliffe, 2013).

However, compared to legacy media, hyperlocals received limited academic attention (Jangdal, 2020). Harte and Williams (2019) argue that the majority of studies on hyperlocal journalism have focused on the United Kingdom and the United States, particularly on topics like presence and sustainability (Harte et al., 2019). According to Lottie Jangdal (2020), there is a gap in this area as far as understanding how hyperlocal content can be used to assess the actual democratic contribution (Jangdal, 2020). The current study aims to expand our understanding of the significance of hyperlocal media in the emerging media landscape by investigating the types of content they produce and disseminate.

Review of Literature

The rise in popularity of hyperlocal news platforms has led to a surge in research in this field. To date, it has primarily focused on comparisons of hyperlocal sites with those of conventional news organisations, the current market, business strategies, challenges, and future perspectives. According to Andy Williams and David Harte (2016), a demand for insights into fragmentary news and information systems is emerging outside of mainstream newsrooms, such as in hyperlocal journalism. They say the research findings on the economics of hyperlocal news serve as a reminder that a lack of financial security can have serious consequences for these news outlets' long-term viability, as well as the security, independence, and sustainability of hyperlocal news publishing as a whole.

Marco van Kerkhoven and Piet Bakker (2014) indicated that the motivation for starting a local online news website is generally grounded in the perception of a local news gap. They say that many of the hyperlocals in the Netherlands started out with the goal of filling in a gap in local news, but their strategies and forms of engagement employed undermine their ability to achieve their goals.

In a similar study, analysing the community news sites in the UK, Andy Williams, Dave Harte, and Jerome Turner (2015) suggest a lack of critical, investigative, and campaigning journalism at a hyperlocal level. At the same time, they identify some small but effective groups of hyperlocal sites that devote themselves almost entirely to public interest news production.

Kyungsik Han, Patrick C. Shih, and John M. Carroll (2014) emphasize that the Local News Chatter (LNC) application enhances the prominence of hyperlocal community news by consolidating local news items and tweets into a tag cloud. According to their findings, this community-oriented tool aims to increase the diversity and visibility of local community information to facilitate social connection and interaction.

Pisapat Youkongpun (2015) indicates that hyperlocal media share many similarities with community media. They both focus on even smaller geographic areas than national media. It serves the interests of both local and regional audiences. According to him, there are four essential characteristics of community-based media: localism, storytelling, empowerment, and diverse participation.

Kristy Hessa and Lisa Waller (2016) proposed viewing hyperlocal as a cultural phenomenon rather than a product or object. They also believe that there is a need for further research on the relationship between the media and the "local," as well as a greater emphasis on the social and cultural components of hyperlocal news. It could aid in identifying aspects of social and cultural life that mainstream media do not or cannot address, providing vital insights about the future of journalism and the importance of being extremely local in a globalised world.

Likewise, Carol Arnold and Shane Blackman (2021) argue that independent hyperlocal operations represent a media subculture. The findings show that independent hyperlocal publishing has borrowed elements from the mainstream, particularly the socially cohesive aspects. Examining hyperlocal operators as a news subculture revealed their resistance to the mainstream parent culture, yet they repurposed and retrieved elements of it in their daily activities.

Evelien D'heer and Steve Paulussen (2013) describe how regional and local newspapers can use citizen journalism to provide hyperlocal community news coverage. According to the study, the community news provided on hyperlocal pages is a mix of hard and soft news, similar to what print local newspapers have been providing for years. The findings suggest that citizen journalists prefer to report on personal interests and experiences, as well as information from the local organisations with which they are involved.

According to Jack Rosenberry (2010), hyperlocal online news sites have an untraditional way of delivering news, but they fulfil roles and functions that are very similar to the ones documented in historical research about community press and social organisations. The paper establishes that the underlying patterns in news-topic selection generally support the idea that contemporary hyperlocal coverage sustains the construction of community ties.

Methodology

Quantitative content analysis is the primary methodology employed in this study. This approach is particularly well-suited for investigating the complex dynamics of content available on hyperlocal platforms. Quantitative content analysis entails a systematic examination of the content accessible on the platform, enabling a thorough investigation of the themes, subtleties, and patterns within it. The evaluation entails determining whether these platforms

exhibit the key elements of community-based media that Pisapat Youkongpun (2015) identified as localism, diverse participation, storytelling, and empowerment.

The study examines content from two hyperlocal media sources in Koyilandy, located in Kerala's Kozhikode district. The first is the hyperlocal website koyilandynews.com, which operates exclusively in this area with local ownership and control. The second is Public, a hyperlocal short video app operating in multiple languages and regions around the country. Public is owned by Inshorts, a popular Indian short news app. This study considers the content published between January 1 and January 31, 2024.

Analysis

The following headings structure the analysis of hyperlocal content: local updates, local issues, and human-interest stories.

Local updates- Overview

	Category	koyilandynews.com	Public App	Total (%)
	Politics	45	27	72 (27.58%)
	Crime	14	12	26 (9.96%)
Local Updates	Accidents	25	25	50 (19.15)
	Obituary	14	0	14 (5.36)
	Programmes & Events	33	25	58 (22.22)
	Health	6	4	10 (3.83)
	Religion	9	4	13 (4.98)
	Announcements	10	0	10 (3.83)
	Development	4	4	8 (3.06)
	Total	160	101	261

Table 1- Local Updates Overview

The table shows that political news is the most dominant category on both platforms, followed by news on programmes and events. A single story can encompass multiple themes and subjects, and the categories may not always be mutually exclusive. In all categories, koyilandynews.com leads in the number of news stories compared to the Public app. The coding criteria for politics encompassed articles on political protests, reporting on the local council, statements of local political leaders, and other political activities.

The heading Programmes and Events lists non-political programmes held by various organisations. Announcements are notifications or communications from local government institutions, including information on power outages, temporary vacancies, and other relevant information. As the table shows, the public app does not provide any content related to obituaries and announcements.

Local issues- Overview

This section explores the representation of local issues in these hyperlocal news outlets over a period of one month.

Category	*koyilandynews.com*	*Public App*	*Total*
Local Issues	4	7	11

Table 2- Local Issues Overview

As previously stated, hyperlocal media is crucial for addressing local issues that conventional media ignore. In January 2024, 11 different articles on local issues appeared on these platforms. This includes reports on pollution, agriculture damage, industrial challenges, and damaged roads. The article given below deals with the issue of pilgrims causing pollution in a nearby lake.

Figure 1- Local issue report

Human-interest stories- Overview

Apart from the hard news explained above, community-based media demands neighbourhood storytelling, which entails sharing stories about the community. It involves sharing opinions, success stories, memoirs, and cultural and historical articles about the region. This section concentrates on the human-interest stories or soft news published on these two platforms.

	Category	koyilandynews.com	Public App	Total
Special Stories	Success Stories	25	8	33
	Literature	2	0	2
	Opinion	1	0	1
	Memoir	2	0	2
	Customs	1	0	1

Table 3- Special Stories Overview

 The Public app lags behind koyilandynews.com in showcasing human-interest stories in all given categories. Most of the special features published in January 2024 are success stories. These stories include the accomplishments of individuals and groups in the community. Regardless of the degree of achievements, these platforms, especially koyilandynews.com, make an effort to highlight them in the community. The website also features literature highlights, social issue viewpoints, stories depicting local customs, and memoirs of locally notable people. Here are some examples of human-interest stories published on the website. The first article depicts a local religious custom, while the second article delves into local history, narrating the story of the local independence leader.

Figure 2- Local Custom

Figure 3- Local History

Civic participation

The digital ecosystem's features enable hyperlocal initiatives to improve citizen involvement in their operations. The literature studied indicates that hyperlocal projects source content from local individuals and promote citizen journalism. In the same way, anyone can post news about their area on the public app, along with the app's local reporters. However, the account "newskoyilandy", which the app has verified with a reporter badge, is the only source of articles published. The app offers the feature of commenting on stories, although there are hardly any comments available. This indicates that though the app has many features to foster civic participation in hyperlocal environments, they are not so popular in the selected location, Koyilandy.

At the same time, the website koyilandynews.com publishes articles written by local citizens, especially feature stories. Local citizens have authored articles regarding social issues, local cultures, and history. The series "Pravasiyude Koyilandy" showcases Gulf residents' memories of their native place. In this way, the website provides an opportunity for local residents to share their opinions and emotions. Some examples are given below.

Figure 4- Pravasiyude Koyilandy

Figure 5- Campaign for Fishermen Community

Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicate that hyperlocal media extensively cover a wide range of topics, offering inhabitants a diverse array of information about what's happening in their community. The emphasis on local material over regional or national content demonstrates their commitment to a hyperlocal focus. The findings also show that the locally based website koyilandynews.com outperforms the multilingual, multiregional platform "Public." The website showcases the local culture, people, issues, and civic involvement, indicating its strong connection to the community. In contrast, the public app focuses solely on hard news, lacking a sense of attachment to the neighbourhood. According to Koyilandynews.com, they received around 27 million readings in 2023. As per their data, human interest stories, or soft news, are the second most read after crime news (B, 2023).

According to the study, politics turned out to be the most frequently discussed subject. Hyperlocal initiatives, with their focus on generating news about local politics and civil society, have the potential to inform and engage local residents with crucial political information. They provide citizens with information about

nearby protests, local opinion leaders' statements, and local governance issues. Covering local governance and politics in deep, hyperlocal media fulfils one of the major tasks assigned to the media in a democratic society. Similarly, hyperlocal media devoted particular attention to the exclusive challenges faced by local residents. Hyperlocal platforms significantly cover local issues, often overlooked by mainstream media.

Additionally, the research identifies hyperlocal media as an emerging web-based platform for local storytelling that has the potential to foster community cohesion and engagement. This narrative is supported by koyilandynews.com's particular emphasis on telling the tales of local people and culture. The articles on local barber, postman, and fisherman communities exemplify the profound integration of this media within the community's fabric. Undoubtedly, it is achievable exclusively through community-based media.

Figure 6- Local Storytelling

In conclusion, the study provides insights on how local media, in the era of information society, remain sustainable and relevant in local markets. Hyperlocal media addressing local politics and governance, expressing local concerns, and endorsing local culture and people nurture a sense of local identity and uphold community cohesion. Ultimately, the website koyilandynews.com exhibits the key features of community-based media, such as localism, diverse participation, storytelling, and empowerment.

References

Arnold, C., & Blackman, S. (2021). Retrieving and repurposing: A grounded approach to hyperlocal working practices through a subcultural lens. *Digital Journalism*, 11(6), 1065 - 1083. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1880330

B, J. (2023, December 31). *രണ്ടുകോടി ഏഴുപത് ലക്ഷം വായനകൾ!; 2023ൽ കൊയിലാണ്ടി ന്യൂസ് ഡോട് കോമിനൊപ്പം രണ്ടുകോടി ഏഴുപത് ലക്ഷം വായനക്കാർ! 2023ൽ കൊയിലാണ്ടി ന്യൂസ് ഡോട് കോമിനൊപ്പം സഞ്ചരിച്ച വായനക്കാരുടെ കണക്കുകൾ അഭിമാനത്തോടെ പങ്കുവെക്കുന്നു.* Retrieved from koyilandynews.com: https://koyilandynews.com/koyilandy-news-com-2023-readers-list/

Han, K., Shih, P. C., & Carroll, J. M. (2014). Local news chatter: augmenting community news by aggregating hyperlocal microblog content in a Tag Cloud. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, *30*(12), 1003–1014. https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2014.925773

Harte, D., Howells, R., & Williams, A. (2019). *Hyperlocal journalism: The decline of local newspapers and the rise of online community news*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315561240

Hess, K., & Waller, L. (2016). Hip to be Hyper: The subculture of excessively local news. *Digital Journalism*, *4*(2), 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.1002859

Jangdal, L. (2020). Hyperlocals matter: Prioritising politics when others don't. *Journalism Practice*, *15*(4), 438–455. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1739551

Paulussen, S., & D'Heer, E. (2013). Using citizens for community journalism findings from a hyperlocal media project. *Journalism Practice*, *7*(5), 588–603. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2012.756667

Radcliffe, D. (2013). *Here and now: UK hyperlocal media today*. NESTA.

Rosenberry, J. (2010). *Online hyper-local news sites fulfill classic functions of online hyper-local news sites fulfill classic functions of community journalism community journalism*. http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

Van Kerkhoven, M., & Bakker, P. (2014). The Hyperlocal in practice: Innovation, creativity and diversity. *Digital Journalism*, *2*(3), 296–309. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.900236

Williams, A., Harte, D., & Turner, J. (2015). The value of UK hyperlocal community news: Findings from a content analysis, an online survey and interviews with producers. *Digital Journalism*, *3*(5), 680–703. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.965932

Youkongpun, P. (2015a). Community-based media in promoting identity and culture: A case study in Eastern Thailand. *Media Watch*, *6*(1), 57–72. https://doi.org/10.15655/mw/2015/v6i1/55389

Youkongpun, P. (2015b). The role of community-based media in strengthening, preserving, and promoting identity and culture: A case study in Eastern Thailand. *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communication*, *1*(3), 197–210. https://doi.org/10.30958/ajmmc.1-3-3